

Esther

A study of prefigures within the story of Esther



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The story is told of Hitler giving one of his fiery speeches in the large hall in Munich early in his rise to power. In this oration he called for the destruction of the Jewish people. In the front row sat a man, who on occasion, would make faces and laugh at the Fuhrer. After the meeting Hitler inquired as to who this man was and why he made faces and laughed at him. The man explained that he was Jewish and said to Hitler, "You should be aware that you are not the first anti-Semite who sought to destroy us. You may recall that the great Pharaoh of Egypt sought to enslave the Jews. To commemorate his defeat and our redemption, we eat tasty Mazot and observe the festival of Passover. Haman was another enemy of ours who brought about his own downfall. The delicious Hamantashen we eat and the jolly festival of Purim recall our deliverance from him. While listening to your venomous diatribe, I wondered what kind of delicacy would the Jews invent and what kind of holiday would be established to celebrate your downfall" [[1]](#footnote-1)

# Introduction

The book of Esther, also known by Jews as “the Scroll” or Megillah, is an inspiring, uplifting, encouraging and sometimes controversial book of Scripture. The book contains prefigures, foreshadows, themes richly intertwined within the rest of scripture, and to top it off, an interesting story as well. Throughout history it has been misinterpreted, trivialized[[2]](#footnote-2), and even argued for exclusion from the biblical canon. God is not mentioned explicitly in the book, nor is any part of Esther referenced in the New Testament. There are no miracles or even prayers. These caused some profound Christian thinkers (Athanasius, John Calvin (who didn’t include the book in his biblical commentaries) and even possibly Martin Luther[[3]](#footnote-3)) to question its inclusion as part of Canon. Yet, upon reading the story, one cannot help but see God moving within the powers of the world to accomplish salvation for His people.

Before we begin, one minor note. For purposes of this review, I will be using Esther as found in the Masoretic texts (and in most modern bible translations). During the creation of the Septuagint (the Greek translation of the Hebrew text), about six chapters of material was added (as noted by Jerome when he completed the Latin Vulgate translation). These are usually attributed to Lysimachus, an Alexandrian Jew during the second century B.C.E.[[4]](#footnote-4) These additions appear to be an attempt to Judaize Esther by including dreams (additions to Esther 1) and prayers by Mordecai and Esther and laments by Esther of having to consort with Gentiles (additions to Esther 3). Currently these texts are used primarily by the Eastern Orthodox Church and as part of the Apocrypha by the Roman Catholic Church. Although the strongest argument appears to be for exclusion of these additions, that discussion is not the purpose of this paper. Therefore, I will focus only on the common accepted Masoretic text.

Esther was the last of the 24 books in the Tanakh to be canonized. It has been traditionally dated to the 3rd and 4th BCE. Based on the information contained in the book it is known that it was written after the destruction of the Temple and during the Persian Empire. There is some debate as to whether the King, Ahasuerus, is historically to be identified with Artaxerxes II (405-359 BCE) or Xerxes I (486-465 BCE)[[5]](#footnote-5), but either way, a 3rd to 4th century BCE dating seems appropriate. What is assured is the author knew the way of life for Jews during the Diaspora as well as the customs of the Persian Empire, so it must have been written before 330 BCE when Alexander the Great conquered Persia.

The book can best be described as story-telling as in a novel. It reads like a great story with transitions, suspense, surprises, character comparisons, and reversals of fortune. None of this adds or subtracts from the truthfulness or historicity of the story. Just because a story is written well, or as a novel, does not make it any less (or more) true. This genre does, however, allow for the inclusion or exclusion of certain events to make the story read better. Just as one might speculate what the Mad Hatter was doing in the years before his infamous tea party in Alice and Wonderland, one can speculate on many gaps in the story of Esther, but still not know all the details, simply because the author didn’t feel they were essential to the theme. In Esther, the theme is simply that God is in control working for our salvation even when we don’t see it or deserve it.

The book can be viewed as a 3 act play:

* The setup and crisis (Esther 1-3)
  + Esther, the captured orphan, is made Queen (the hero along with her uncle Mordecai)
  + Haman, the Villain, gains and uses his power to set up the destruction of the Jewish people
* The struggle (Esther (4-5:8)
  + Esther and Mordecai work to avert the destruction
  + Possible destruction of the Heroes
* The resolution and victory (Esther 5:9-10)
  + The downfall of the Villain, Haman
  + The Triumph of the Jews over their enemies

Like any good story, something resonates with the reader long after the first reading. They picture themselves in the roles, trying to understand the emotions, desires and motivations of the characters. Yet the story is just one part of a much larger and more beautiful story, and to miss its overall context is to miss the point of the author. Therefore, to examine Esther, it’s best to look at the main characters and events and how they fit into the larger picture (prefigures and foreshadows) of the biblical narrative. Knowing that the different books of the Bible were written by different people in many different nations and times will help build faith not only in the interconnectedness and inspiration of the Bible, but also in the ultimate Truth - God is in control and points throughout history and the Bible to his ultimate plan of salvation.

Before we begin our dig into Esther, we must briefly define some terms of use. These will help guide the discussion in the paper. A prefigure is an early indication or version of (something or someone). That early representation is called a type, whereas the fulfillment is called the antitype. This occurs throughout the Bible but most commonly where a figure or event in the Old Testament is a type of a New Testament figure or event (the antitype). For example, Paul in Romans 5:14 states, “Yet death reigned from Adam to Moses, even over those whose sinning was not like the transgression of Adam, who was a **type** of the one who was to come.” (ESV). Other translations use words like symbol (NLT), pattern (NIV), and figure (KJV) in place of the word type. Therefore, in this example, Adam is a type and prefigure of Jesus (antitype). (For example, Adam was the first born of humanity, Jesus is the firstborn of the dead, both had miraculous creation, etc.) Another way to look at it, is Adam foreshadows Jesus. Foreshadow can be defined as a warning or indication of a future event and may be used interchangeably with prefigure.

John Oakes identifies three rules to determine if something is a prefigure (type/antitype) and/or foreshadow:

1. If a New Testament writer says a particular passage in the Old Testament is a foreshadow/prophecy/prefigure/type, then it is.
2. If an Old Testament passage works as a foreshadow/prophecy/prefigure/type both in the general sense and in the specifics, then it is probably legitimate.
3. If one already knows that a general event in the Old Testament is a foreshadow/prophecy/prefigure/type, then it is safer to assume that the details are foreshadows as well.[[6]](#footnote-6)

Since the book of Esther is not referenced in the New Testament (excluding the possibility that Jesus attended the festival of Purim in John 5:1), we will not be able to use or rely on rule #1 above. This means we must be exceedingly cautious when identifying possible foreshadows, prefigures or types. A quick look on the internet will reveal such “prophecies” linked to the book of Esther including the end of the world after the uprising of Iran (modern day Persia) and unbelievably the destruction of Christians by Jews.[[7]](#footnote-7) Therefore I will strive to be cautious when reviewing possible prefigures and types. I will also include some of the more common views and why I either agree or disagree with their inclusion.

# Prefigures (symbols, types and antitypes) in Esther

In the story, Esther is more than just the title character, she is an orphaned Jew living with her uncle after the destruction of the divided Kingdom of Israel and Judah. Through her actions, salvation comes to the Jewish nation, and therefore Esther has been viewed as a type of Jesus, Mary, and the Church. I believe that only one of these types is justified but will examine all three. Once again, we are generally focused on Rule #2 and #3 above:

* If an Old Testament passage works as a foreshadow/prophecy/prefigure/type both in the general sense and in the specifics, then it is probably legitimate.
* If one already knows that a general event in the Old Testament is a foreshadow/prophecy/prefigure/type, then it is safer to assume that the details are foreshadows as well.

## Esther

### Esther as Jesus

Esther can be viewed as a type of Jesus. They both had similar backgrounds growing up as Esther was raised by a man who was not her father (Mordecai) and Jesus was likewise raised by a man not his father (Joseph). Both came from poor backgrounds under occupation from a foreign power (Persia and Rome).

She, by her actions, saved the Jewish community just as Jesus saved all mankind by His actions on the cross. Willing to sacrifice herself if needed (5:16) for her people’s salvation, Jesus was willing to do the same for all people (Phil 2:5-11). Both struggled with doing what needed to be done and had to reconcile themselves to their “fathers’” will. Esther argued with Mordecai (5:6-16) and Jesus talked it out with God (Garden of Gethsemane), both trying to reconcile themselves to their purpose on Earth.

The decree publishing the edict for Jewish destruction was issued the 13th of Nisan (3:12). While the text is unclear when the fasting started (either on the 13th or 14th), the three days of fasting most likely would have been during the 14th-16th of Nisan.[[8]](#footnote-8) The 14th of Nisan was the date of Jesus Crucifixion according to the book of John, and the beginning of his three days of death.[[9]](#footnote-9) It was also the date of the final plague in Egypt resulting in the liberation of the Jews from slavery. The timeframe and symbolism to the Jewish population at the time would have been unmistakable, as would the timeframe and symbolism to the Christian reader today.

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| --- | --- | --- |
|  | Esther (type) | Jesus (antitype) |
| General | Saved the Jews by her actions | Saved all mankind by His actions |
| Specific | Orphaned and raised by a man who was not her father | Raised by a man who was not His father |
| Specific | Was willing to sacrifice her life for others salvation | Was willing to sacrifice His life for others salvation |
| Specific | Esther fasted 3 days | Jesus was dead for 3 days |
| Specific | Esther struggled with doing what needed to be done and reconciling herself to her father’s (Mordecai’s) will | Jesus struggled with doing what needed to be done and reconciling himself to his Father’s will (Garden of Gethsemane) |
| Specific | Her father (Mordecai) directed the actions that brought salvation | God directed the actions that brought salvation |

There are other specifics that could be identified above, but I believe that stretches the comparison too far. For example, Esther’s name is translated as “star”. Jesus is compared to a star in Revelation 21. Although it’s possible this contributes to the typology, I think it’s more likely minor coincidence and a result of looking for other connections.

### Esther as Mary

Esther is argued to be a prefigure of Mary within the Roman Catholic Church. The argument goes that Esther was celebrated for two things: One, she was excluded from the edict of death to her people, and two, she saved her people from extermination by interceding with the King. As such, Mary was excluded from original sin (the Immaculate Conception) and she, through our prayers to her, intercedes on our behalf for our salvation. In effect, she becomes co-redeemer with Jesus, as Esther was with Mordecai.[[10]](#footnote-10) This analogy might work if there was biblical truth for the claims about Mary. There is, however, no biblical proof for either the concept of Immaculate Conception and co-redeemer status for Mary and in fact, many arguments against both in the biblical text.[[11]](#footnote-11)

### Esther as the Church

Esther is also argued as a prefigure of the Church. Just as Esther was beautiful and offered to the King in marriage, so the Church will be beautiful and offered as a bride to Christ. If that is accepted it is then argued that as salvation came only through Esther, so also through the Church. It is once again a stretch to argue that Esther prefigures the Church in either a general or specific sense, and has the feel of someone knowing the result they want searching for justification in through analogy in the scripture. If one were to accept this viewpoint, then it would stand to reason that the specifics of Esther’s approach to the King (multiple banquets, bowing before the scepter) would have some meaning within the Church today.

I wish to reiterate, we must be cautious when examining the bible through the use of foreshadows and prefigures. We should strive not to read too much into what is there but also strive to avoid reading too little as well. Foreshadows, prefigures, types and antitypes cannot reveal something opposite of other scripture.

In conclusion, Esther, viewed as a prefigure of Christ, works in both the general and specific sense. Esther as Mary only, works if doctrinally you believe either the Immaculate Conception or co-redeemer status for Mary. As both are contradicted by other scriptures, the idea of viewing Esther as a type of Mary fails. Esther as a type of the Church works great as a metaphor but fails as a type/antitype relationship.

## Mordecai

Mordecai is Esther’s uncle and inspiration. Refusing to compromise, loyal to the Kingdom despite being held captive, he becomes second in command to the King, executing the edicts that will save the Jewish nation in Persia. He is also mentioned as a descendent of King Saul.

A quick search of the internet shows Mordecai associated as a type of Jesus, God or the people of God. I do not believe there is enough evidence to make a conclusive argument for any of these, with the exception of Mordecai as the people of God. Focusing on rule #2 and #3 again, I will briefly examine each.

### Mordecai as Jesus

To reconcile this in the general sense, you have to stretch some facts. For example, you could say that just as Jesus saved His people by his actions, so did Mordecai. But Mordecai’s actions didn’t actually save the people, it was Esther’s. In a technical sense, Mordecai as second in command did issue the order for the Jews to be able to defend themselves, but their salvation had already come with the defeat of Haman. But, let’s assume that in the general sense, this comparison works. If so, then we would expect the specifics to also work if it was a true type/antitype relationship.

Unfortunately, there is only specific within the story that works. After being threatened with death by Haman, Mordecai was elevated to second in command (Jesus sitting at God’s right hand). Besides that, there is very little else in the story other than general characteristics (standing up for the truth, threatened with death, love for his people) that would match the life of Jesus. As such, Mordecai as a type of Jesus is borderline. As a general rule, when examining prefigures we should err on the side of caution, so the case fails.

### Mordecai as God

In a general sense, you could make an argument that if Esther is a type of Jesus, her “father” could be a type of God. Mordecai directed the events (instructing Esther what to do) and was the person who carried out the action (issued the order) that set into motion the salvation of the Jews. Yet Mordecai had to be given the power to issue the order by the King which would then imply something higher than God directing events. As this comparison fails in the general sense, Mordecai as a type of God fails to satisfy any of the rules.

### Mordecai as a symbol of the people of God

Throughout the story, the leader of the Jewish population is Mordecai (Esther was not known to be a Jew until later in the story when she reveals herself to the King). Mordecai has become part of the Persian Empire, but is known to be separate (3:8) from others. Likewise, God’s people are in the world, but not part of it (John 17:6). Mordecai is a type of the people of God.

Mordecai saves the King through his actions by revealing an assassination attempt and submits to the ruling authorities. The people of God are commanded to honor the emperor (1 Pe 2:17) and be submissive to the rulers and authorities (Titus 3:1-2). Mordecai stands up for God against Haman and the King when it would violate God’s decrees, just as the people of God are called to do the same.

Condemned to death, Mordecai was saved by the miraculous and even honored. God’s people are saved from condemnation by Christ and the miracle of his resurrection. Also, as we showed earlier, if Esther is a type of Jesus, then Mordecai viewing his salvation can only come through Esther would lead more credence to the typology.

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|  | Mordecai (type/symbol) | People of God (antitype) |
| General | Part of the Persian empire, but separate. | In the world, but not part of the world |
| Specific | Submits to the ruling authorities | Titus 3:1-2 – be submissive to rulers and authorities |
| Specific | Stands up for God against Haman and the King when it would violate God’s decrees | Gods people stand up for God despite what may happen to them on Earth |
| Specific | Condemned to death but saved by the miraculous | Saved from condemnation by Christ |

Mordecai as a type/symbol of God’s people does work. Mordecai as either a type of Jesus or God is at best borderline and while some comparisons can be made, they are not conclusive and should be rejected.

## Ahasuerus

Ahasuerus, King of Persia, is usually identified with Xerxes I. He deposed the previous Queen and selected Esther to replace her. Emotional, irrational, guided by poor advisors, moved by peer pressure, and the absolute earthly authority in his Kingdom, the King is not shown in a very positive light throughout the story. I will examine Ahasuerus as a type of God and the worldly powers (Kingdoms) of the world.

### Ahasuerus as God

The argument for Ahasuerus as a type of God is that he had ultimate power to save or destroy the Jews and God has power to save or destroy humanity. However, Ahasuerus is presented as a drunk, a fool, someone who changes his mind on a whim and someone who worships his own power. All the exact opposite of God. Trying to make this comparison must be rejected.

### Ahasuerus as the worldly powers (Kingdoms) of the world

Ahasuerus is a symbol/type of all the worldly powers on Earth is more easily defended. As King he believes he has the ultimate power over his Kingdom, but ultimately is not in control of the big picture (God is). Likewise, the worldly powers of today believe they are in control, but ultimately God controls their actions (Acts 14:16, Ezra 1:1). Both the King and the world’s powers have the ability to decide life and death on Earth, but have no control over the soul. Both can both be cruel or kind, rational or irrational, and yet neither see beyond the day to day missing the big picture. Additionally, just as Mordecai and God’s people were separate in Ahasuerus’ kingdom, so God’s people are a separate (holy priesthood) within the World’s kingdoms.

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|  | Ahasuerus (type/symbol) | Worldly powers (antitype) |
| General | Believes he has ultimate power over his Kingdom, but is really not in control | Believe they have power over what they rule but not really in control |
| Specific | Ability to decide life and death on Earth | Ability to decide life and death on Earth |
| Specific | Can be cruel or kind, rational or irrational | Can be cruel or kind, rational or irrational |
| Specific | Doesn’t see the big picture as is focused on day to day activities (e.g. doesn’t see what Haman is doing, or Esther and how it affects God’s plan) | Don’t see how what they do is part of God’s plan |
| Specific | God’s people are part of his Kingdom but separate | God’s Kingdom is a part of the world but not in it |

Conclusion: Ahasuerus as a type/symbol of worldly powers works, however, Ahasuerus as a type of God does not.

## Haman

Haman is identified as an Agagite, presumably a descendent of King Agag the Ammonite, a noble elevated to the highest rank among all nobles and royal officials. Determined to destroy the Jewish population due to his hatred of Mordecai, he is ultimately destroyed along with his entire family. Haman can be viewed as a type of Satan.

### Haman as Satan

Haman attempts to destroy the Jews just as Satan attempts to destroy God’s People. Haman manipulated events and promoted lies about Mordecai and the Jews in an attempt to destroy them, using the worldly power given him. Satan is the Father of Lies and seeks to destroy God’s people using the worldly power given him (Matthew 4). Neither however, have ultimate power and cannot do anything without the King’s approval (Esther 3:9, Job 1).

Haman viewed his ultimate triumph as destroying God’s people and their symbol (Mordecai) on a gallows. An argument can be made that the Hebrew word used for gallows was translated using the same root word for cross in the Septuagint but there remains a lot of controversy on this topic. It is agreed that both mean some version of tree. Both Haman and Satan viewed their ultimate triumph by a tree (the gallows for Mordecai and the crucifixion of Jesus on a tree). In both cases, however, it was the beginning of their downfall and ultimate defeat.

Even after the defeat of Haman, the Jews still had to battle on longer until their ultimate victory in the month of Adar. Even though Satan was defeated at the cross, God’s people still must battle until the ultimate victory and Jesus’ second coming.

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| --- | --- | --- |
|  | Haman (type/symbol) | Satan (antitype) |
| General | Attempts to destroy God’s People (Jews) | Attempts to destroy Gods People (Church) and Jesus |
| Specific | Manipulates events and lies about God’s people to destroy them | Is the Father of Lies and seeks to destroy God’s people |
| Specific | Built gallows to fulfill his ultimate victory, which turned into his biggest defeat | Saw events to destroy Christ on a cross in victory, but turned into ultimate defeat |
| Specific | Even after his defeat is secured, the Jews must battle for a while longer against his descendants until they are completely safe | Even after the defeat on the cross, the people of God must continue to battle until Satan is ultimately defeated |

## Vashti

The Queen deposed by Ahasuerus since she would not appear when commanded by the King is a character that only appears in the first chapter of the story. There is some modern thought that she was ordered to appear nude except for her crown in front of the King and his guests who were quite intoxicated after 7 days of feasting and drinking (Esther 1:10-12). There is very little information about her and not enough to adequately conclude that she is a type of anything. Some have argued that she represents Gods people who are unwilling to submit to authority[[12]](#footnote-12) and while it is true that rebellious of God are condemned, the specifics do not match. For example, if Vashti was a type of those rebelling against God, the God would be represented by Ahasuerus. But Ahasuerus’ edict for her to come to him was based on the fact that he was drunk and wanted to flaunt his wealth and her beauty to all his friends. In addition, Vashti held a banquet for all the noble women, a major event in the short few paragraphs about her, yet that would seem to have no meaning to the comparison. In conclusion, Vashti is a minor character in the story and can best be viewed as a plot device to start the story.

# Conclusion

The characters in the story of Esther, when exploring their types and antitypes, give a larger picture and context to the book that could not be missed by the early Christian community. God’s people (Mordecai) working through Jesus (Esther) against the worldly powers (Ahasuerus) and Satan (Haman) triumph. Although God is not mentioned specifically within the text, one cannot help but see his movement throughout the scriptures. You can see the same themes (God’s salvation, God’s in control) throughout the book and it’s linkage to other scriptures and events. Esther so closely mirroring not just Exodus (thousand years earlier) but also Jesus (hundreds of years later) points to the inspiration and consistency of the scripture.

I have been asked why worry about types, antitypes and all this stuff (actual quote), with the implication being what does it all mean to someone trying to live out the bible today. Living out anything requires belief and faith that what you are doing is correct. Seeing the interconnectedness of the scripture while knowing that it was written as separate books, by separate authors, across thousands of years in different times and cultures can do nothing else but exclaim that this is God’s Word for all mankind.

1. Philip Goodman, “The Purim Anthology” (The Jewish Publication Society) 1980:384,385. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. It has been argued its only purpose was to explain the origin of Purim. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. There is a bit of controversy as to what Martin Luther really thought of Esther as some of the quotes attributed to him may be mistranslations of Esdras. For an interesting discussion of this viewpoint, you can see James Swan on his website: <http://beggarsallreformation.blogspot.com/2011/08/luthers-view-of-esther.html> [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Bruce Metzger, “Esther, Additions to the Book of” Encyclopedia Judaica (Jerusalem: Keter 1972) Vol. 6, pp 913-14 [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. If Xerxes is Ahasuerus, then the attack on the Spartan 300 would have occurred between Chapters 1 and 2. Also, all of Esther would take place between chapters 6 and 7 of Ezra. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. Oakes, John. From Shadow To Reality. pp280-281 [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. I will not dignify the very anti-Semitic website that this viewpoint comes from by including the URL. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. Note: Jewish accounting would have considered 1 hour of day on the 14th through 1 hour of day on the 16th equal to 3 days and nights of fasting [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. John has the trial and sentencing of Jesus taking place before Passover, with his sacrifice occurring during the time the lamb was sacrificed (3-5pm) on the 14th of Nisan. [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. <http://www.motherofallpeoples.com/2008/10/the-mystery-of-the-blessed-virgin-mary-in-the-old-testament/> [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. Immaculate Conception is the belief that Mary was born without original sin and never sinned. This contradicts scriptures such as Romans 3:9-10, 23 and even Mark 3:20-21. The co-redeemer status of Mary, to be fair is debated within the Catholic community. It falls into generally two arguments, Mary is truly a co-redeemer with Christ (biblically unjustified as Christ is the sole redeemer of sins), or that Mary is simply a partner with Jesus but the redeeming grace still flows from Him. Based on these beliefs, you could make an argument for prefigurement with Mordecai playing the role of Jesus. [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
12. <http://thectp.org/Notes/Bride/Bride_4.pdf> [↑](#footnote-ref-12)